

NP closest conjunct agreement in Portuguese: a cartographic approach

Concordância com o constituinte mais próximo em sintagmas nominais no
português: uma abordagem cartográfica

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Abstract

This squib investigates adjective agreement with the closest coordinated NP in Portuguese. Using a qualitative analysis of secondary data from Villavicencio and Sadler (2005), it examines cases where adjectives agree with the nearest NP while semantically modifying the entire CoordP. Two derivational proposals are compared: an ellipsis-based approach and a base-merge-order approach. Both account for the data, but the base-merge-order derivation seems more economical and requires fewer speculative operations. Pending questions include experimental validation of these derivations and whether similar agreement patterns appear in other Romance languages.

Keywords: coordination; syntactic cartography; agreement; φ -features; Portuguese.

Resumo

Este *squib* investiga a concordância do adjetivo com o sintagma nominal coordenado mais próximo em português. Por meio de análise qualitativa de dados secundários de Villavicencio e Sadler (2005), examinam-se casos em que o adjetivo concorda com o NP mais próximo, mas semanticamente modifica toda a CoordP. Duas propostas derivacionais são comparadas: uma baseada em elipse e outra na ordem de merge base. Ambas explicam os dados, mas a derivação baseada em merge base é mais econômica e requer menos operações especulativas. Questões pendentes incluem a validação experimental dessas derivações e a investigação de padrões de concordância semelhantes em outras línguas românicas.

Palavras-chave: coordenação; cartografia sintática; concordância; φ -features; português.

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1 Introduction

In this squib, I adopt the core assumptions of Syntactic Cartography (Kayne, 1994; Cinque, 2005, 2023; Scott, 2002; Laenzlinger, 2011). Within the Principles and Parameters framework, Syntactic Cartography aims to provide precise ‘maps’ of sentence structure in natural languages. More specifically, this approach proposes a universal base order for adjectives (Cinque, 2005, 2023; Scott, 2002; Laenzlinger, 2011).

Cinque (2005) argues that the merge order of demonstratives, numerals, adjectives, and nouns is a primitive of Universal Grammar: DemP > NumP > AP > N. If, as Cinque (2023) further suggests, linearization is part of Narrow Syntax (the Faculty of Language in the narrow sense), then languages may employ at least four strategies to linearize these constituents: (i) no movement, as in English; (ii) simple movement, as in Brazilian Portuguese; (iii) movement with pied-piping of the *whose pictures* type, also attested in Brazilian Portuguese and other SVO languages; and (iv) movement with pied-piping of the *pictures of whom* type, found in SOV languages such as Japanese. In Portuguese, derivations of the *whose pictures* type can occur, in which the NP moves above AP to an AgrAP projection, carrying AP along, yielding structures such as DemP > NumP > AgrAP [NP]_i > AP > t_i, as in *esses três homens charmosos* (‘these three charming men’). In English-like languages, by contrast, no such movement takes place: NP remains below AP, yielding structures such as *charming men*.

With respect to the linearization of adjectives, Laenzlinger (2011) proposes that the extended projection of NP contains a rich field of adjectival modification in Narrow Syntax, namely: AP Comment > AP Evidential > AP Size > AP Length > AP Height > AP Speed > AP Depth > AP Width > AP Temperature > AP Humidity > AP Age > AP Shape > AP Color > AP Nationality > AP Material > NP. Languages vary, however, in the type and height of movement involved. In English, the underlying merge order is relatively transparent, since it is reflected directly in surface word order. In Brazilian Portuguese, by contrast, this order is obscured by movement operations employed in adjectival modification.

Turning to coordination, I assume it to be an asymmetrical structure. Following Aixiu and Abeillé (2021), Demonte and Pérez-Jiménez (2012), and Willer and Gold (2017), coordination results from a CoordP head that relates two symmetrical categories in the sense of Tescari Neto (2013), but within an asymmetrical configuration. For example, a phrase such as *charming men and women* is analyzed as a CoordP headed by the conjunction *and*, which relates the first NP (*men*) to the second NP (*women*).

According to Villavicencio and Sadler (2005), Portuguese¹ licenses two main agreement strategies when the adjective follows a CoordP but takes scope over the entire constituent: (i) agreement with the closest NP, as in *Esta canção anima os corações e mentes*

¹I thank the reviewer for this important observation. The data from Villavicencio & Sadler (2005) refer to Brazilian Portuguese (BP), although the authors do not specify the regional or idiolectal variety. I follow their description for the purpose of our analysis. I acknowledge that, in some varieties of BP, the adjective in sentences such as *Esta canção anima os corações e mentes brasileiras* may be interpreted as modifying only the second conjunct (*mentes*). This variation illustrates that multiple readings are possible and can coexist within BP. Our derivational proposal is compatible with both readings: it captures the wide-scope reading over the entire CoordP, as in *corações e mentes brasileiros*, while also allowing for a restricted reading under certain conditions. Future research could investigate these differences systematically, using acceptability judgments and corpus studies to determine how variation in scope interacts with dialectal and stylistic factors.

brasileiras ('This song cheers [the] hearts-MASC and minds-FEM Brazilians-FEM'); and (ii) agreement with the entire CoordP, as in *Esta canção anima os corações e mentes brasileiros* ('This song cheers [the] hearts-MASC and minds-FEM Brazilians-MASC'). Notably, however, sentences such as *Esta canção anima as mentes e corações brasileiras* ('*This song cheers [the] minds-FEM and hearts-MASC Brazilian-FEM') are ungrammatical, since the adjective *brasileiras*, morphologically marked for gender and number, agrees only with the NP *mentes*, which is already specified as feminine plural.

The aim of this squib is to contribute to the description of agreement in natural languages. More specifically, I propose a syntactic derivation for the agreement of adjectives with the closest coordinated NP in Portuguese. This study is motivated by the lack of research within Syntactic Cartography on the representation of coordination in sentence structure. While traditional grammars have addressed aspects of the phenomenon (Cunha and Cintra, 2016; Rocha Lima, 2021; Bechara, 2019), analytical proposals that seek explanatory adequacy remain scarce. The methodology adopted here consists of a qualitative analysis of secondary data from Villavicencio and Sadler (2005), which illustrate cases where adjectives agree with the closest coordinated NP while nonetheless taking scope over the CoordP as a whole.

This squib is organized into three sections, besides this introduction. Section 2 outlines the theoretical assumptions adopted in this proposal. Section 3 develops and discusses syntactic derivations for adjective agreement with the closest coordinated NP. Section 4 presents final considerations and future directions, including the design of a psycholinguistic experiment.

2 Theoretical framework

In the second half of the 1990s, a new proposal for analyzing the functional categories of natural languages was put forward: the cartographic project (Rizzi, 1997; Cinque, 1999, 2005, 2023). According to Cinque (2006, p. 3), this project aimed to “draw maps as detailed as possible of the functional structure of the sentence and its phrases”. Within the scope of this project, all languages share the same set of rigidly ordered functional projections. Interlinguistic variation in the expression of such projections is related, even if partially, to the fact that specific movements can be parameterized in languages. In general terms, the cartographic project, when presented as a research enterprise of the Theory of Principles and Parameters, assumes a set of axioms: Binary Branching (Kayne, 1984), Linear Correspondence Axiom (Kayne, 1994), Full Interpretation Principle (Chomsky, 1995), Uniformity Principle (Chomsky, 2001) and One Feature, One Head Principle (Kayne, 2005). These axioms are briefly reviewed below.

Kayne (1984), when proposing Binary Branching, postulates that any non-terminal node can dominate, at most, two child nodes. It is also pointed out that such a principle is necessary so that there is no ambiguity, for example, in the resumption of a referent or even an anaphora. Thus, Binary Branching can be justified by imperatives of the Binding Theory itself.

Kayne (1994), based on crosslinguistic evidence, proposes the Asymmetry Hypothesis, whose central claim is that linear order is strictly determined by hierarchical relations.

In particular, the Linear Correspondence Axiom (LCA) establishes a direct mapping between asymmetric c-command and precedence: if W and Y are non-terminal nodes, W dominates w and Y dominates y , and w asymmetrically c-commands y , then W precedes Y . Thus, linear order is not an independent component of grammar but a consequence of hierarchical structure. From this perspective, the apparent variation among languages is derived from movement operations: although all languages share an underlying SVO base order, the parameterization of movements can yield surface orders with final heads. Another implication of this hypothesis is that specifiers and adjuncts are always merged to the left of a head, while complements are merged to the right. Moreover, each projection contains only one specifier, in line with the asymmetry requirement².

Chomsky (2001) explicitly assumes the Uniformity Principle. Within the scope of this principle, all languages would share the same set of functional projections of the same type and order. Thus, there would be no parameterization of type or order of functional projections in languages. The presence of these projections in languages is not conditioned, for example, by morphological specificity. Therefore, even if there is no specific morphology to grammaticalize a given projection in a language X , its existence and availability to this language is assumed. This principle underlies what has been conventionally called, in syntactic cartography, the strong hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, languages can parameterize the types of movement they perform, but they cannot parameterize the type and order of the functional projections available in the Faculty of Language.

Finally, Kayne (2005) introduces the One Feature, One Head Principle. Beyond predicting the mononuclearity of heads—that each head bears a single feature checked through movement—the principle holds that semantic properties may be syntacticized, i.e., encoded in the derivation prior to spell-out. Accordingly, whenever a functional category is attested in a language and carries semantic import, it is expected to be syntacticized, for example through morphological marking or the presence of adverbs.

2.1 Proposals for NP-AP Agreement

Cinque (2005) argues that the merge order of demonstratives, numerals, adjectives, and nouns is a primitive of Universal Grammar: $\text{DemP} > \text{NumP} > \text{AP} > \text{N}$. If, as Cinque (2023) further proposes, linearization is part of Narrow Syntax, then languages can resort to at least four strategies for ordering these constituents: (i) no movement, as in English; (ii) simple movement, as in Brazilian Portuguese; (iii) movement with pied-piping of the *whose pictures* type, also found in Brazilian Portuguese and other SVO languages; and (iv) movement with pied-piping of the *pictures of whom* type, characteristic of SOV languages such as Japanese.

²I thank the reviewer for this important observation. I agree that our initial formulation might have conveyed the impression that Kayne's (1994) proposal simply states that syntactic derivations must be linearized, which indeed sounds trivial. I have revised the paragraph to emphasize the core insight of the Linear Correspondence Axiom (LCA): namely, that linear order is strictly derived from hierarchical structure. More specifically, linear precedence is determined by asymmetric c-command, so that structural hierarchy fully determines word order. This reformulation highlights the fact that Kayne's Asymmetry Hypothesis does not merely assume linearization as an outcome of derivation, but rather posits a tight connection between hierarchical relations and linear order, from which the asymmetry of phrase structure follows.

In Portuguese, derivations of the *whose pictures* type are possible. In such cases, the NP moves above AP to an AgrAP projection, carrying AP along (Cinque, 2023). The resulting structure is DemP > NumP > AgrAP [NP]_i > AP > t_i, as in *esses três homens charmosos* ('these three charming men'). By contrast, in English, no such movement takes place: the NP remains below AP, yielding structures such as *charming men*.

With respect to the linearization of adjectives in natural languages, Laenzlinger (2011) argues that the extended projection of the NP contains a full field of adjectival modification within Narrow Syntax, namely: AP Comment > AP Evidential > AP Size > AP Length > AP Height > AP Speed > AP Depth > AP Width > AP Temperature > AP Humidity > AP Age > AP Shape > AP Color > AP Nationality > AP Material > NP. Languages, he suggests, may differ in both the type and the height of movement involved. In English, this underlying merge order is relatively transparent, since it surfaces directly in linearization. In Portuguese, however, the order is obscured by movement operations employed in the derivation of adjectival modification.

Cinque (2023) further refines the analysis, proposing the following merge order of constituents in the extended NP projection: DemP (*these*) > Dem ReinforcerP (*here*) > MultiplierP (*two*) > CardinalP (*hundred*) > ClassifierP > MeasureP (*two shades*) > DegreeP (*too*) > AP (*red*) > NP (*lipsticks*). Each of these projections, Cinque argues, is directly dominated by an AgrP, which hosts moved constituents and thereby triggers agreement. On this view, the sharing of ϕ -features within the extended NP projection emerges as a byproduct of movement operations.

2.2 Coordination

Coordination is generally assumed to be an asymmetrical structure. Following Aixiu and Abeillé (2021) and Demonte and Pérez-Jiménez (2012), it is analyzed as the projection of a CoordP head that relates two symmetrical categories (in the sense of Tescari Neto, 2013) within an asymmetrical configuration.

Aixiu and Abeillé (2021) investigate Closest Conjunct Agreement (CCA) in French attributive adjective agreement, drawing on both a large corpus and an acceptability-judgment experiment. Their findings challenge the prescriptive norm by showing that feminine agreement is acceptable with attributive adjectives in cases of conflicting coordinated nouns. This phenomenon parallels patterns observed in other Romance languages, including Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese. The corpus data further reveal that, contrary to traditional descriptions of French grammar, CCA is frequently attested—particularly with prenominal adjectives, where it is in fact the most common pattern. The authors argue that the preference for CCA in such contexts may be explained by a combination of structural factors, such as hierarchical coordination (Kayne, 1994), and cognitive considerations, such as incremental processing.

Demonte and Pérez-Jiménez (2012) examine the complexity of CCA in Romance, countering earlier claims (e.g., Camacho, 2003) that the phenomenon does not occur inside DPs with coordinated nouns. Based on extensive corpus evidence—including singular, plural, group, mass, abstract, and deverbal nouns—the study confirms the presence of CCA in Spanish and demonstrates that coordinated noun phrases ([D [NP y NP]]) cannot be reduced to ellipsis.

The authors further argue that singular agreement (CCA) between determiners, pronominal adjectives, and the first conjunct can be derived from the interaction of two types of nominal features: *c*-features (concord) and *i*-features (index). Both are syntactically active within the DP domain, with number operating as a dual-scope feature: morphologically as concord, and referentially as index. The proposal maintains that concord and index differ primarily in terms of the interface at which they are interpreted: concord features at PF, index features at LF. As a result, there is no need to posit distinct syntactic operations for concord-agreement and index-agreement. Agreement, on this view, is a single syntactic operation applying uniformly across domains, matching features regardless of type. Variation between singular and plural marking in adjectives following coordinated noun phrases is thus attributed to post-syntactic operations at PF, where terminals are linearized and feature-specific processes take place.

3 Analysis

According to Villavicencio and Sadler (2005), Portuguese licenses only two major agreement strategies when the adjective is postposed to a CoordP, but assigns scope to the entire CoordP, namely: 1) agreement of the adjective with the closest NP (*Esta canção anima os corações e mentes brasileiras* / 'This song cheers hearts-MASC and minds-FEM Brazilians-FEM') and 2) agreement of the adjective with the entire CoordP (*Esta canção anima os corações e mentes brasileiros* / 'This song cheers hearts-MASC and minds-FEM Brazilians-MASC'). An immediate problem that may emerge is to derive these occurrences in which the AP agrees with an NP, but has scope over the entire CoordP. That is precisely what this squib is shedding light at.

Two major proposals are presented in this section: 1) an ellipsis proposal, and 2) a base order proposal. Albeit the pros and cons of these two proposals, they seem to be able to explain Villavicencio and Sadler (2005) data. According to the first proposal, a CoordP does not have underlying φ -features of gender. NP1 and NP2 compete to check their underlying φ -features of gender within the entire CoordP. The NP closer to the AP may win this competition, by means of movement and ellipsis. To derive *corações e mentes brasileiras* ('hearts and brazilians-FEM minds-FEM'), Cinque's (2023) base merge order within the extended projection of the NP is adopted, alongside with Kayne's (1994) asymmetrical account of coordination. There would be the following steps:

1. Merge of a CoordP head that hosts in its Spec position NP1 and in its complement position NP2: ([CoordP [NP1] Coord [NP2]])
2. Merge of Cinque's (2023) projections within the extended projection of both NPs: ([DemP > Dem reinforcerP > MultiplierP > CardinalP > Classifier P > MeasureP > DegreeP > AP > [NP1]] Coord [DemP > Dem reinforcerP > MultiplierP > CardinalP > Classifier P > MeasureP > DegreeP > AP > [NP2]])
3. NP movement to AgrP projections that immediately c-commands the AP field: ([DemP > Dem reinforcerP > MultiplierP > CardinalP > Classifier P > MeasureP > DegreeP > [AgrP NP1] > AP > [t₁]] Coord [DemP > Dem reinforcerP > MultiplierP > CardinalP > Classifier P > MeasureP > DegreeP > [AgrP NP2] > AP > [t₂]])

4. AP ellipsis in PF: ([DemP > Dem reinforcerP > MultiplierP > CardinalP > Classifier P > MeasureP > DegreeP > [AgrP NP1] > AP > [t₁]] Coord [DemP > Dem reinforcerP > MultiplierP > CardinalP > Classifier P > MeasureP > DegreeP > [AgrP NP2] > AP > [t₂]]])

Taking Villavicencio and Stadler's (2005) occurrence into account, there would be: [CoordP [corações-MASC] e [mentes]-FEM] ([CoordP [hearts-MASC] and [minds-FEM]]) in the first step. In the second step, there would be: [DemP > (...) > [AP brasileiro] > [corações-MASC]] e [DemP > (...) > [AP brasileiro] > [mentes-FEM]] ([DemP > (...) > [AP brazilian] > [hearts-MASC]] e [DemP > (...) > [AP brazilian] > [minds-FEM]]). In the third step, there would be: [DemP > (...) > [AgrP corações-MASC] > [AP brasileiros-MASC] > [t₁]] e [DemP > (...) > [AgrP mentes-FEM] > [AP brasileiras-FEM] > [t₂]]] ([DemP > (...) > [AgrP hearts-MASC] > [AP brazilian-MASC] > [t₁]] e [DemP > (...) > [AgrP minds-FEM] > [AP brazilian-FEM] > [t₂]]]). In the fourth step, there would be ellipsis of the AP *brasileiros*-MASC, thus linearizing *corações e mentes brasileiras* ('hearts-MASC and Brazilian-FEM minds-FEM'). As it can be surmised, this approach is based on movement (Portuguese is an AP mandatory movement language) and on ellipsis³.

The second approach is solely based upon phrasal movement. According to the second proposal, the entire CoordP may be subjected to Cinque's (2023) hierarchy, thus licensing: DemP (*these*) > Dem reinforcerP (*here*) > MultiplierP (*two*) > CardinalP (*hundred*) > Classifier P > MeasureP (*two shades*) > DegreeP (*too*) > AP (*red*) > CoordP (*lipsticks and eyelashes*). To derive *corações e mentes brasileiras*, CoordP is raised to the specifier position of an AgrP head which immediately c-commands the AP field and the features of the closest NP are copied by the maximal projection. There would be the following steps:

1. Merge of a CoordP head that hosts in its Spec position NP1 and in its complement position NP2: ([CoordP [NP1] Coord [NP2]])
2. Merge of Cinque's (2023) projections within the extended projection of the CoordP: DemP > Dem reinforcerP > MultiplierP > CardinalP > Classifier P > MeasureP > DegreeP > AP > [CoordP [NP1] Coord [NP2]]
3. CoordP movement to an AgrP projection that immediately c-commands the CoordP field: DemP > Dem reinforcerP > MultiplierP > CardinalP > Classifier P > MeasureP > DegreeP > [AgrP **CoordP**] > AP > [t_{CoordP}]

³I thank the reviewer for this insightful comment. I agree that a derivation alone may seem stipulative if not supported by independent evidence. I would like to clarify that the ellipsis-based proposal for adjectival agreement in Portuguese is grounded in two independently motivated phenomena: (i) the availability of AP ellipsis in Portuguese (see, e.g., Villavicencio; Sadler, 2005), and (ii) the obligatory movement of APs within the extended NP projection (Cinque, 2023). My analysis makes explicit predictions regarding the two agreement strategies attested in the data. When AP ellipsis applies, the adjective surfaces agreeing with the closest NP, as in *corações e mentes brasileiras*. When ellipsis does not apply, the AP spells out once with default masculine agreement, as in *corações e mentes brasileiros*. These predictions naturally account for the coexistence of both patterns documented in Portuguese and show that our proposal is not purely stipulative but explanatory. Furthermore, this proposal opens avenues for empirical testing. For example, one can investigate whether heavier or semantically complex APs resist ellipsis, predicting that local agreement with the closest NP becomes less likely. Corpus studies could also examine the relative frequency of default masculine vs. closest-NP agreement, while controlled acceptability judgments could evaluate speaker intuitions across different syntactic environments. Such diagnostics would provide independent evidence for the viability of the derivational operations proposed here.

4. Copy of the φ -features of the closest NP to the maximum projection: DemP > Dem reinforcerP > MultiplierP > CardinalP > Classifier P > MeasureP > DegreeP > [AgrP CoordP [NP1-MASC] and [NP2-FEM] > AP [ADJECTIVE-FEM] > [t_{CoordP}]

Taking Villavicencio and Stadler's (2015) occurrence into account, there would be: [CoordP [corações-MASC] e [mentes-FEM] ([CoordP [hearts-MASC] and [minds-FEM]]) in the first step. In the second step, there would be: DemP > (...) > AP [brasileiro] > [CoordP [corações] e [mentes] (DemP > (...) > AP [brazilian] > [CoordP [hearts] and [minds]). In the third and fourth steps, there would be: DemP > (...) > [AgrP CoordP [corações] e [mentes] > AP [brasileiras] > [t_{CoordP}] > DemP > (...) > [AgrP CoordP [hearts-MASC] and [minds-FEM] > AP [brazilian-FEM] > [t_{CoordP}].

To both approaches a remnant problem is posed: how would *corações*-MASC e *mentes*-FEM *brasileiros*-MASC ('hearts-MASC and Brazilian-MASC minds-FEM') be derived? It is discussed, within the first approach, that instead of erasing the first masculine AP in the extended projection of *hearts*, there would be the erasing of the second feminine AP in the extended projection of *minds*⁴. Finally, there would be subtraction of this adjective and remnant movement of NP1 (*hearts*), the CoordP head, and NP2 (*minds*). These operations are knowingly laborious to Narrow Syntax (Chomsky, 1995) and there is a lack of evidence for all of them in the phenomenon under scrutiny. Therefore, the second approach may explain in a more economic fashion this occurrence. Within the second approach, after the movement of the CoordP to Spec AgrP there would be the copy of hearts φ -features to the maximal projection, thus linearizing: *corações*-MASC e *mentes*-FEM *brasileiros*-MASC ('hearts-MASC and Brazilian-MASC minds-FEM').

4 Final remarks

The specific purpose of this squib was to propose a syntactic derivation for the agreement of the adjective with the closest coordinated NP in Portuguese sentences. The methodology of this work consisted of the qualitative analysis of secondary data from Villavicencio and Sadler (2005), that illustrated the occurrences of adjectives agreeing with the closest coordinated NP, but with scope over the CoordP. Two major proposals were presented to explain Villavicencio and Sadler (2005) data: 1) an Ellipsis based approach and 2) a base merge order approach.

Even though both approaches were able to explain the results of Villavicencio and Sadler (2005), the second approach seemed to be more economic to *Narrow Syntax*. To test the felicity of the second test, a Self-Paced Reading Test could be proposed. The task would be to read sentences displaying NP-AP agreement and to answer questions about these sentences. For example, the participants would read a sentence like *Essa canção anima os corações*-MASC e *mentes*-FEM *brasileiros*-MASC ('This song cheers the hearts-MASC

⁴I thank the reviewer for raising this important point. In this proposal, both operations—erasing the AP of the first NP or the second NP—are in principle possible. However, I argue that there is a systematic preference in Portuguese for preserving the φ -features of the first NP (*corações* in the example *corações e mentes brasileiros*). This preference could be motivated by principles of syntactic economy (Chomsky, 1995), as erasing the second AP would perhaps require additional operations, including remnant movement and further copying, making the derivation less economical. Optionality might be at stake: while both operations are theoretically available, the attested pattern reflects the more economical choice.

and Brazilian-MASC minds-FEM'). After reading the sentence, they would answer a question about the *hearts and minds*, such as: which one is Brazilian? There would be given three options: A) *hearts*, B) *minds* and c) *hearts and minds*. Should participants answer A and B more frequently, there would be evidence in favor of the first elliptical approach. However, should participants choose more frequently option C, there would be evidence in favor of the second base merge order approach, since the entire CoordP would be under the scope of the AP. The dependent variables would be the alternatives chosen by the participants (A x B x C) and the independent variable would be the scope reading of the adjective (NP1 x NP2 x CoordP).

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Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT):

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MANUSCRIPT INFORMATION

Section: *Squibs*

Received: March 13, 2025.

Accepted: September 3, 2025.

Published: October 13, 2025.

HOW TO CITE

ALVES, Matheus Gomes. NP closest conjunct agreement in Portuguese: a cartographic approach.

Caderno de Squibs: Temas em estudos formais da linguagem, v. 10, n. 2, p. 37-46, 2024.

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